

Early Fairbury Photographer A.J. Swap

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Fairbury has always had at least one photographer operating a studio since the town was founded in 1857. One of these early photographers was Albert J. Swap. His family story began with the birth of his father, Albert E. Swap, in 1839 in New York. When Albert E. Swap was nine years old, he and his family moved to Wisconsin for two years. The family then moved again to LaSalle County, Illinois. When Albert E. Swap was twenty-two years old, he enlisted in Company C, Seventh Illinois Cavalry. His unit fought in many of the more minor battles that occurred during the Civil War. The Battle of Corinth was the most famous battle they fought in. Albert E. Swap was honorably discharged in 1865.

After the Civil War, Albert E. Swap returned to farming in the LaSalle area. In 1866, he married Miss Sarah E. Watson of Mendota, Illinois. They had four children, but two died in infancy. Albert and Sarah Swap moved their family to Weston, Illinois. Albert E. Swap engaged in the mercantile business in Weston. Albert and Sarah then moved to Fairbury. Mr. Swap ran a Fairbury grocery store until 1908, when he retired. Mr. Swap was a very active member of the Fairbury GAR (Grand Army of the Republic). Albert Swap died at age 76 in 1915 in Fairbury. He was buried in Mendota, Illinois.

One of Albert and Sarah Swap's children was Albert Jay Swap. A.J. Swap was born in 1868. After finishing in the local schools, A.J. continued his studies at Valparaiso College in Indiana. While at college, A.J. met and married Miss Ida Mitchell of Barry, Illinois, in 1891. Mr. and Mrs. A.J. Swap never had any children.

In 1890, the Fairbury City Council passed a new ordinance about traveling photographers. The rule prohibited photographers from conducting business in cars, wagons, tents, or portable houses unless they paid \$3.00 per day for a city license. The fine for violating this new ordinance was between \$5.00 and \$25.00 for every offense.

Mr. Swap had been trained as an accountant and took a job as an accountant for a Peoria wholesale grocery company. After working a couple of years as an accountant, Mr. and Mrs. Swap studied photography so they could work together. Around 1894, A.J. Swap offered his photography services in Fairbury. He set up his store in a building on Third Street.

In 1895, Mrs. A.J. Swap became one of the founding members of the Chautauqua Literary and Scientific Circle in Fairbury. In 1896, the Blade recounted that A.J. Swap's photograph car would be parked just west of Churchill's elevator. This elevator used to be on the south side of Locust Street, between First and Second Streets. Mr. Swap must have bought the \$3.00 license required, so he complied with the city ordinance prohibiting traveling photographers.

In 1897, photographers A.J. Swap and E.M. Phillips both had a photography display at the Fairbury Fair. Around January of 1900, Mr. and Mrs. Swap decided to move to La Harpe, Illinois. La Harpe is on the TP&W railroad line, just east of the Iowa border. In the May 1900 issue of the Blade, a notice was published that Mr. Joslin had purchased Mr. Swap's recently vacated Third Street photography studio.

In the 1900 U.S. Census, A.J. and his wife Ida had moved to La Harpe, Illinois. On this census, A.J. listed his occupation as a photographer. After living in La Harpe a few years, an excellent job occurred with the Western Stoneware Company at Monmouth, Ill. A.J. Swap accepted this position as an accountant. This company then purchased a pottery company in Clinton, Missouri. After moving to Clinton, the company wanted A.J. Swap to move to Oklahoma. Mr. and Mrs. Swap enjoyed living in Clinton, so he refused the job transfer and instead took a new job as a mail carrier.

As a letter carrier, A.J. Swap practiced his religion of universal kindness and brotherly love. He performed many acts of kindness. These acts of kindness included helping the ill, supplying a wheelchair when needed, dispensing charity to a family in sore distress, and relieving human suffering whenever he could. One of Mr. Swap's friends gave him the title of "the postman of good cheer." A.J. Swap retired after working 25 years as a letter carrier.

Mr. Swap's health started to fail due to a bad heart condition. When new medicines suggested by his doctor did not seem to work, Mrs. Swap sensed the end of her husband's life was near. A.J. Swap loved to read newspapers. That evening, Mrs. Swap read to him about the latest German-British developments in South America. Mr. Swap went to bed and passed away at 10 PM in January of 1940. He was buried in Park Lawn Cemetery in Clinton, Missouri.

Mrs. A.J. Swap passed away in 1952 in Clinton, Missouri. She was buried with her husband in the Park Lawn Cemetery.

A review of the historical data indicates that A.J. Swap was a Fairbury photographer between 1894 and 1900. In that era, cabinet card photographs were very popular. They were a photographic print pasted to a larger cardboard card measuring about 4.5 by 6.5 inches. Many of these old cabinet cards continue to be discovered. They have the words "A. Jay Swap" and "Fairbury" printed on the photograph. Such old photos likely date to the 1894 to 1900 era in Fairbury.

Although A.J. Swap only practiced photography for about six years in Fairbury, his cabinet card photos taken over 120 years ago are still in excellent condition. Many of these old cabinet cards are still being discovered today.

The Fairbury Echoes Museum has a new display with information about many early photographers, including A.J. Swap. Admission to the museum is free, and the new collection is a fascinating review of Fairbury's photographic history.



Fairbury, Illinois

A. JAY SWAP.

Photograph of Benjamin and Eliza
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